

Immortalizing Tirot Sing

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The British East India Company's early concern with the Khasi and Jaintia hills was commercial. They first got acquainted with the Khasi and their land by the acquisition of the Diwani of Bengal in 1765 where they acquired Sylhet from the Moguls. Necessities of trade and commerce arising from the Khasi lime quarries, from which Bengal had drawn its supplies from time immemorial attracted European enterprises to the Khasi hills. Prior to 1765, the Company acquired only a share of this trade from Mir Kasim, the Nawab of Bengal. By the acquisition of the Diwani, the company took over the monopoly of the lime trade. This active interest in trade with the Khasi drew the British merchants into commercial relations with the proprietors of the mines, the Khasi chiefs². The commercial interest of the British in these hills, and the need of a direct road through the hills to connect Sylhet with Assam led the British to gradually annex the Khasi hills.

Tirot Sing and the British

As the British began to take active interest in these hills, good and friendly relationship prevailed between the Khasi and the British as the commercial intercourse between them was found to be mutually convenient. In 1824, the British became involved in the Burmese War which ended in 1826 by the Treaty of Yandabo. By the end of the 19th century, Assam had become an integral part of the East India company's territories³. The Anglo-Burmese war profoundly affected the whole of the North Eastern Frontier of Bengal including the Khasi and Jaintia hills. By this time David Scott, the British political agent of the North East Province was impressed by the cool and healthy climate of the hills and thought of obtaining a salubrious spot for the renovation of health⁴. He also found out that the hills were suitable for the cultivation of European crops like potatoes, pears and others. Moreover, the most important of all was the need of a proper road through the hills to connect the two important British headquarters Gauhati and Sylhet for the smooth running of the British administration. Thus David Scott concluded

a treaty with Tirot Sing the *Syiem* or chief of Nongkhaw in 1826, by which he obtained permission for the construction of the road through Tirot Sing's territory. At the beginning things were amicably maintained, but later on the highhandedness of the military at Nongkhaw, the false manoeuvre, their harsh treatment of the poor inhabitants, these and other misdeeds, led to the Khasi rebellion under Tirot Sing in 1829 which lasted till 1833, which inevitably led to the annexation of the Khasi hills in the same year.

Tirot sing became prominent when he organised and fought wars of resistance against the British rule. It was on the 4th April 1829 that the Khasi States took up arms in a concerted effort to drive away the British from Khasi land. It became a long drawn struggle, when on 13th January, accompanied by a party of swordsmen and bow men, numbering about thirty, with utmost dignity, the valiant chief tendered his submission to Henry Inglis. On 26th January, 1833, Tirot sing appeared before the Foujdari Court at Gauhati, in lieu of capital punishment, he was sentenced with transportation of life to Tenasserim, then he was removed to Dacca till his death⁶. This record is contradicted by a tradition which says that it was during the truce arranged by the British to continue the talk for affecting final settlement. When he came out, Tirot Sing was captured by Inglis.

Many scholars gave different views on the date of Tirot Sing's death, as the exact date of his death could not be established. For many years efforts have been made to find out the exact date. At first the 29th March was observed as the death anniversary of u Tirot Sing. This date marked the installation of the nephew of u Tirot Sing, u Rajon Sing as his successor. It was through the views expressed by some educated Khasi who wrote to the government to protest against the observance of the 29th March as the death anniversary of u Tirot Sing, that the government of Meghalaya shifted the date to the 4th of April and this day is known as Tirot Sing's day, which is declared as a state holiday by the Government of Meghalaya. This date is significant, as it was on this particular date in 1829, that the Khasi people under the leadership of u Tirot Sing and other chiefs rose against the British. However,

a great satisfaction came to the people, when Dr. David Syiemlieh, Reader, Department of History, NEHU came across a document which shed a new light on the death of u Tirot sing. It was through his endeavour and hard work that brought to an end the long time misconception of the people about the real date of Tirot sing's death. The document revealed that Tirot Sing died on 17th July 1835.

Tirot Sing immortalized

Tirot Sing stands out amidst those other Indian leaders who organised and fought wars of resistance against the British rule. His name is immortalized as it appeared in many books and journals and in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1974). In 1984 the Director, Publications Division, Ministry of information and Broadcasting, Government of India published a book, *Builders of Modern India - u Tirot Sing* by Dr. Hamlet Bareh. In the same year a souvenir on the 150th Death anniversary of u Tirot Sing was published by the Khasi cultural society, Meghalaya, Shillong. To commemorate Tirot Sing, a monument was raised at Mairang in 1954. The foundation stone of this monument was laid at Mairang on the 15th December 1952 by Shri Jairamdas Doulatram, Governor of Assam. He paid his glowing tribute to u Tirot Sing as follows.

"Tirot Sing's name **should** ever be remembered by the coming generation of the Khasis and Jaintias as that of **the brave** man who stood for principles and **good sacrifices** his all for the sake of those **principles**. This is a great virtue which should be a **great** idea for the young Khasis and Jaintias of **today**".

"The Youths of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills should **reflect** in their life the **priceless** qualities of **courage and sacrifices** which Tirot Sing's career upholds **before** them".

Another monument was erected in 1986 for Tirot Sing and two other leaders of Meghalaya in the state Library compound, Shillong. The Khasi Cultural Society also erected an inscription in his memory in the same compound. Tirot Sing's name has become a subject of many dramas, poems and songs. The Rympei Theatrical Centre, a

well known dramatic group has staged an one act play on the last days of Tirof Sing which is highly applauded. The Khasi cultural society also has staged plays of freedom struggle which included u Tirof Sing and others. A few years back a college known as Tirof Sing memorial college was set up at Mairang. In 1985, a school was established at Laitkynsew in memory of u Tirof Sing. In 1987 as part of Tirof Sing's Day celebration, the Khasi cultural society in association with the Hynniew Trep Students and Youth organisation, the Meghalaya Exservicemen League, the Khasi student union, and the Tribal Women Welfare and Development Association jointly organised a programme on the 3rd of April. Besides other programmes of the day, a male dance known as *Ka shad wait* or sword dance was performed. To honour u Tirof Sing, a commemorative stamp was issued by the government of India and it was released on the 3rd of February 1988 in Delhi. On the 18th of July, a formal handing over of the stamp to the Meghalaya Chief Minister, Shri P.A. Sangma took place at Mairang amidst a huge gathering. The Union Minister of State for communication, Shri Giridhar Gomango presented a stamp album on the great freedom fighter of Meghalaya, u Tirof Sing to commemorate his 153rd death anniversary. It was celebrated on 18th July as 17th July was a Sunday. Shri Giridhar Gomango speaking on the occasion said that the tribal people of the country had made a remarkable contribution to the freedom movement of the country as well as for the development of the nation. He further said that the supreme sacrifice made by Tirof Sing for the country from this region had become a legend, Tirof Sing is a living illustration, that tribal people are not lacking behind in any field. The Chief Minister of Meghalaya, Shri P.A. Sangma, said that the issuing of the stamp was not only a sign of recognition to the sacrifices made by Tirof Sing, to preserve freedom, liberty, and our cultural identity, but also symbolised the recognition of the people of Meghalaya by the centre. He further said that Tirof Sing had emerged not as a mere leader of Khasi Hills, but as a national leader and a real patriot. Dr. David R. Syiemlieh in his speech told the people, how he came across that important document which established for the first time the exact

date and time of the death of u Tirot Sing. The acting *Syiem* of the *hima* Nongkhlaw, the *Myntri*, other elders of the state and many people attended this function which was a great occasion in the history of the *hima* Nongkhlaw.

The Tirot Singh's Dance

After India achieved her independence, efforts were made to identify and reconstruct the lives of those who resisted the British rule and u Tirot Sing figured among them, as one of the freedom fighters of our country. The people of the *hima* Nongkhlaw too, felt that they should honour Tirot Sing, and that there was no other way to honour him than the performance of a Khasi dance which is similar to the Weiking dance. Thus u (late) Kedro Manik Syiem, the chief of Nongkhlaw and his Durbar decided to honour u Tirot Sing by holding a dance celebration. Thus the Tirot Sing holding's

dance or Tirot Sing's day celebration started regularly from the 29th March 1958 at Mairang in the West Khasi hills district. It is a dance which was organised in memory of u Tirot Sing, *Syiem* of Nongkhlaw, who gave his life for the people. In 1985, the acting *Syiem* u Besto Manik Syiem along with the Durbar decided to follow the decision of the government of Meghalaya to celebrate Tirot Sing's Day on the 4th of April. Thus the dance was held on this date from 1985, which also include other programmes.

In 1985, the celebration was held for the first time on the 4th of April. The Chief Guest on this occasion was the Meghalaya Finance Minister, Shri D.D. Lapang. In his speech he reminded the people of the patriotism of u Tirot Sing who preferred to die as a slave in prison rather than to live as a ruler and slave of the British. The community Development Minister of Meghalaya Shri Kitdor Syiem also spoke on the occasion and asked the people to follow the footsteps of u Tirot Sing who sacrificed himself for the sake of his people¹².

In 1987, the celebration was held on the 4th April amidst a huge gathering. There were about fifteen female and ten male dancers in their dancing costumes. The *Dhulia* or musicians beat the drums and play the pipes while the dancers perform the dance. The programme of the day was in two parts. The first half from 11 A.M. to 2 P.M. included the various items

by the students of the *hima* or state of Nongkhlaw. The second part of the programme from 3 P.M. to 5 P.M. was the performance of a Khasi dance. After the male and female dance then followed an all male dance known as *Ka shad mastieh* and *shad wait* or a sword dance, it lasted for about twenty minutes. Many people came to witness the celebration which included the *syiem* or chief, his *myntri* or ministers and the other elders of the state. Some elders of the state gave speeches on Tirot Sing, about his life, wars against the British and the history of the state. The students sang a song about Tirot Sing. After the dance, there was a prize distribution where prizes were awarded to the winners in the singing competition and also prizes were given to the *Dhulia* or musicians from Nongdem and the Khasi dancers from Laitarted¹³.

Conclusion

As we have seen the Tirot Sing's Day celebration started about two decades ago, and it was the *Syiem* and his Durbar who took a decision to honour u Tirot Sing, by holding a Khasi dance and other programmes. In the Khasi political set up, the *Syiem* is a limited chief and he cannot perform any important act without first consulting and obtaining the approval of the Durbar. The Tirot Sing's Day Celebration started with a definite objective that is to commemorate the heroic deeds of u Tirot Sing in the Khasi wars of resistance against the British, which is connected with the history of the British rule in the Khasi hills. Thus through this celebration u Tirot Sing and history are immortalized and his name is a living symbol in the life of the people.

Notes and references

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